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## Jesus and the Women Disciples

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Recent proclamations from both the Vatican and the Southern Baptist Convention would lead one to believe that Jesus of Nazareth positively chose to exclude women from his inner circle of discipleship. In fact contemporary biblical scholarship shows the exact opposite to be the case. Luke's gospel reveals that Mary of Magdala, Joanna and Susanna "traveled with them and supported them out of their resources." (Luke 8:1-3).

It is hard for contemporary believers to understand just how radical Jesus' inclusion of women is because we lack the lens of first century Palestinian Judaism. Because the Roman occupation and their culture granted them few civil rights, Palestinian Jewish women were among the poorest in the world in Jesus' day. Take a moment and imagine that you are a Palestinian Jewish woman:

- ◆ You are not permitted to speak to men in public. You belong to your father's household or your husband's after your marriage is arranged before age 12 by your father. If you speak to a man in public it could be construed as infringing on your husband or father's property rights. If you are raped, your father's household receives much less in bride price (you are damaged goods), and worse, you run the risk of being stoned as an adulterer.
- ◆ You are not educated because only men are permitted to learn the Torah, the main reason for learning to read.
- ◆ You are not permitted to be a legal witness in court and if your husband wishes to divorce you (even over something as trivial as burning the dinner according to Rabbi Hillel) he may, but you are not permitted to divorce your husband for any reason.
- ◆ While technically you may inherit land, your husband has control over its use and its fruits.
- ◆ When you become a woman and your menses appear you start a whole new way of life in which you cannot touch or be touched because those who touch you become ritually unclean. For a man this means he must bathe seven times before he can offer sacrifice at the Temple. You cannot touch household items because they too become unclean for all who would use them. When you have a child you are unclean for 40 days after the child is born if it is a boy, and 60 days if it is a girl.

What do you learn? You learn that your womanly functions are unclean, impure and associated with evil. For this reason you do not go to synagogue when you have your monthly cycle, and women are not permitted to proclaim Torah at synagogue because one never knows when they will be unclean.

With this cultural lens as backdrop we are now able to read the scriptures with new eyes:

- ◆ Jesus' inclusion of Mary of Magdala, Joanna and Susanna in his itinerant Galilean discipleship was nothing short of revolutionary in a culture in which women did not speak to men in public let alone travel around the countryside with them. Jesus, it would seem, revered and respected God's call to women regardless of social conventions.

- ◆ Mark 5:25-34 shows Jesus healing the woman with a no... praising her courageous faith for touching him despite the powerful taboo of ritual impurity (Mark 5: 25-34).
- ◆ In Luke 10:38-42 we find Mary sitting at Jesus' feet which was the traditional place of rabbinical students. Jesus defends Mary's right to learn about the Torah over her sister's objections that she is stepping outside accepted roles for women.
- ◆ John's Gospel shows Jesus refusing to hold women as unilaterally guilty of sexual sin. Jewish law required that both women and men be stoned if caught in the act of adultery yet the religious leaders brought only the woman for punishment (John 8: 2-11).
- ◆ Jesus' teaching on divorce is now seen to be markedly protective of women who will become penniless if cast out of the patriarchal household.

If you are a first century woman is it any wonder that like Joanna, Susanna and Mary of Magdala you gather what resources you have and follow him . . . even through crucifixion, burial, death and resurrection?

Contrary to popular opinion, there is no evidence anywhere in scripture that Mary of Magdala was either a prostitute or a public sinner. Instead all four Gospels show her as the primary witness to the most central events of Christian faith. Mary of Magdala leads the group of women who witness Jesus' death and burial, the empty tomb and His Resurrection. Biblical scholars regard this as one of the strongest proofs of the historicity of the Resurrection accounts. Had they been fabricated by overly zealous disciples, women would never have been named as witnesses in a society which did not even accept them as legal witnesses.

What difference does all of this new biblical scholarship make to us today? Rather than envisioning Jesus and twelve men traveling around Galilee we now have a new mental model in which Jesus' itinerant band is seen to include women disciples too. Women Christians are now able to retrieve a better sense of their own history. For many this is an immensely healing experience. And finally, celebrating and learning about Jesus' remarkable inclusion of women despite strong cultural prohibitions can inspire new efforts on behalf of all the marginalized wherever and whomever they may be.

Two thousand years of misrepresentation may now hopefully be reversed. Mary of Magdala, the Samaritan woman, Mary and Martha of Bethany, Joanna, and so many other women disciples will become the inspiring role models for twenty first century Christians that they were for those who first believed in the Risen Christ.

And Jesus' query to Mary of Magdala in the garden "Woman, Why Are you Weeping" may at last become as unnecessary in our times as it was on that first Easter morning.

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